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THE

MORALITY

OF

STAGE-PLAYS

SERIOUSLY

CONSIDERED.

EDINBURGH:
M,DCC,LVII.
(Price Sixpence.)

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NOTHING can be more alarming, to every well-wiſher to true religion, than to find diſputes ariſing among its Profeſſors, which may end in diviſions and animoſities hurtful to the ſpirit of religion itſelf. People who begin ſuch diſputes have much to anſwer for, unleſs they have ſufficient reaſon for what they do. It is well known, that the people of this country are well diſpoſed, ſober and religious; that they are ready to take every public offence much to heart, and, as far as their diſapprobation will operate, that they ſtrenuouſly contribute to remove it. We ſhould therefore beware of trifling with their honeſt zeal, or of making them waſte, againſt objects of a harmleſs or indifferent nature, that oppoſition,

which ſhould be all employed againſt real vices and corruptions. Miſtakes in this article are attended with many ill conſequences; they miſlead our apprehenſions of duty; they create ill-will, and become a ſource of groundleſs antipathy between perſons, who ſhould entertain ſentiments of kindneſs and charity towards one another. I am ſorry that there ſhould be any appearances of this kind amongſt us at preſent, and would think myſelf very happy in contributing to remove them. We are alarmed with an imputation of irreligion, which is caſt upon the entertainments of the Theatre; and it may be apprehended, that perſons who liſten to this charge will think very unfavourably, if not with ſome degree of antipathy, of their neighbours, who continue to take any part in ſuch entertainments. I hope that no perſon would chuſe to bear the imputation of hating his brother without a cauſe, and that every well-diſpoſed perſon will be glad to hear any obſervations which may help us to form a right judgment of one another.

The Stage has ſubſiſted in *Britain* about two hundred years; it has been during this period the entertainment of people of diſtinction, and of others too, who were enabled to partake of it. Whether it has corrupted our people in any degree, is a queſtion not eaſily determined. I am inclined to believe, that, conſidering the mixture of good and bad

bad men which are to be found in every age, the people of this iſland are not inferior to thoſe of any other age or country whatever. This will be a preſumption, that, if Plays are a poiſon, it is at leaſt but ſlow in its operations. Another obſervation which I will make by the way, is, that however the Stage may have corrupted our people, the manners of the people have ſo far prevailed, as, in ſome reſpects, to have reformed the Stage. On this head we may come to a ſure concluſion, becauſe we may compare Plays that were admitted during ſome part of this period, with thoſe which are now chiefly in repute. In making this compariſon it will appear, that a certain degree of indecency and licentiouſneſs once permitted, is now rejected, and that Plays more pure, and of a better moral tendency are either choſen from our antient ſtock, or that theſe qualities at leaſt are expected from every Writer of the preſent age. We cannot be too anxious in forwarding this reformation, when it is in any degree incompleat. But I am ſenſible that it is in vain to ſpeak in this manner, whilſt an opinion remains, that the very name and form of a Play is offenſive and pernicious. I confeſs that I am at a loſs fully to account to myſelf for the prevalence of ſuch an opinion. It is not derived from Scripture; for I cannot recollect any thing like a warning againſt the Stage, either in the Old or New Teſtament.

Our

Our Saviour, who appeared at a time when Plays were in high repute in different parts of the *Roman* Empire, ſays nothing to warn us of their immorality. The Apoſtle *Paul*, in writing his Epiſtle to the *Romans*, amidſt various inſtructions and cautions which he gives, is ſilent on the ſubject of Plays, which were then in high repute amongſt the people he was writing to. In preaching at *Athens*, the ſame Apoſtle expreſsly quotes a ſentence from one of the *Greek* Poets, Acts xvii. 28.; *For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain of your own Poets have ſaid.* This is a very ſublime expreſſion, and beautifully applied by the Apoſtle, as will appear on conſulting the context. It ſhows that he was ſenſible of the inſtructions and good impreſſions which we may receive from poetry, and was directed, by that Spirit which ſupported him in his Miniſtry, to apply it ſo properly to thoſe purpoſes. Nor is this the only proof he has given of an eſteem for good performances of this nature. He has, in the firſt Epiſtle to the *Corinthians*, xv. 33. inſerted into the ſacred text a line from a *Greek* Play, which now ſubſiſts: *Be not deceived, evil communications corrupt good manners.* Who does not ſee that ſuch ſentiments, and ſuch inſtructions muſt be improving to mankind, wherever they are found, whether in proſe diſcourſe, or in a Play? And, if the whole ſtrain of a Play is framed to this purpoſe,

poſe, it ſurely deſerves eſteem and encouragement from every well diſpoſed perſon, who has the means of filling up his vacant hours with ſuch entertainments. I am ſorry that any perſon ſhould have overlooked this conſideration, or given reins to a headlong zeal againſt the Stage, ſo unlike the wiſdom and diſcernment of the holy Apoſtle, whom we have quoted. The Stage indeed may be abuſed, and ſo may the wiſeſt inſtitutions of mankind: Religion itſelf can hardly be preſerved from corruption: The Papiſts, and other Sectaries, daily miſapply the doctrines of Scripture, to ſerve their own unlawful purpoſes. The pulpit, in the poſſeſſion of every party, into which Chriſtians are unhappily divided, has often rung with other ſounds than thoſe of the Goſpel of peace, and put us in mind, that when the beſt things fall into the hands of corrupt men, then the wiſeſt and moſt ſacred inſtitutions may ſuffer ſome abuſe: But this will furniſh no argument againſt any ſubject which is ſo abuſed. I ſhould be ſorry to offer any apology for abuſes which may have appeared on the Stage: I hope that every audience, in our times, will have judgment and ſeverity enough to reject examples of this nature: But I cannot admit any ſuch abuſe, as a valid argument againſt the Stage in general. We do not prohibit the uſe of food and drink, becauſe ſome men abuſe them to exceſs; nor do we forbid all

relaxation

relaxation from buſineſs, becauſe ſome unhappy perſons do miſchief in their ſports: Neither ſhould we condemn every poetical compoſition, intended for the Stage, becauſe ſome Writings of this kind have been found faulty and licentious. People, who are acquainted with performances of this nature, are ſenſible that a number of grave, moral and edifying pieces, would, by ſuch an undiſtinguiſhing ruin, be loſt to mankind. The Authors of ſuch works have been eſteemed worthy of great praiſe, and have been thought to bear a conſiderable part in promoting the intereſt of virtue. We cannot doubt of this, when we find any degree of regard paid to them in Holy Writ; and what we have obſerved to this purpoſe above, is ſufficient to connect their defence with the honour of Scripture itſelf. This is more than apology ſufficient for endeavouring to ſhow, that ſuch performances may not only be innocent, but be of great benefit to mankind. I am ſenſible that perſons who need much information on this head, may likewiſe need to be told what is the nature of a Play; and I will now give ſome notion of it, that every perſon, if poſſible, may be enabled to judge for himſelf.

Plays are of two kinds, called *Tragedy* and *Comedy*; the one repreſents the actions of common life, and compoſitions of this nature have been the moſt liable to abuſe; becauſe

cauſe wit and ridicule are ſometimes found to be petulant, and the familiarity of this ſtyle is more eaſily mixed with indecencies: But the perfection of Comedy conſiſts in expoſing to juſt ridicule the follies and abſurd vices of ordinary men; where it fails in this purpoſe, the abuſe is manifeſt, and will be condemned by every judicious audience. Tragedy, on the other hand, is ſerious, grave and majeſtic; it repreſents the actions of great men, and their conduct chiefly on great and intereſting occaſions, their ſtruggles in difficult and diſtreſſing ſituations, where the ſentiments they expreſs raiſe admiration or pity, and where the very faults they commit become ſo many warnings to the ſpectator. Every Tragedy therefore contains a ſtory, and may convey inſtruction in the ſame manner with a parable or fable; it differs only in the form, and not in the effect. In a Parable, the ſtory is related; in Tragedy, the ſubject is expreſſed by ſome action and converſation which is repreſented, and we are left to collect the ſtory from the ſpeeches of the perſons concerned in it. In a Parable, we wait for the moral till the ſtory is concluded, when the whole appears to have been an illuſtration of ſome moral precept; in a good Tragedy, we have a continued moral from beginning to end; the characters, the ſentiments, and the obſervations, which come from the perſons who ſpeak, are calculated to move and inſtruct us;

and

and we are deeply engaged by ſuch repreſentations, becauſe we take part with amiable characters, and become anxious about the event. It muſt appear ſtrange, to ſay, that every ſtory, parable or fable, either in the form of narration, or in that of a Tragedy, muſt be a wrong thing in itſelf. One ſtory, indeed, however told, may be dull, tireſome, and leave bad impreſſions; but another ſtory, we all know, may be agreeable, entertaining, and leave the beſt impreſſions on the hearts of the hearers. We cannot therefore condemn the ſtory repreſented in any Tragedy, till we know of what kind it is, till we know whether it tends to leave good impreſſions or bad ones, in the minds of the hearers. If it is found to leave good impreſſions, it ſhould certainly be commended, and highly deſerves the countenance which the Apoſtle *Paul* hath given to ſuch works, altho' written even by Heathens. In order to ſhow in what manner a tender and affecting ſtory improves the heart, and ſtrengthens every good diſpoſition, I ſhall conſider the hiſtory of *Joſeph* and his cruel brothers in that view. We find the elder brothers moved with envy and malice againſt an innocent child, becauſe he had his father's affection, and was diſtinguiſhed by forebodings of Divine favour. They reſolved to ſhed his blood, when he came to them alone, in the deſart; but being diverted from this cruel purpoſe, they ſold him as a ſlave

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to ſtrangers who were paſſing thro' the wilderneſs. Every humane perſon, who reads this piece of hiſtory, will be moved at the diſtreſs of the innocent ſufferer, and will feel a horror at the cruelty of the brothers. Here then we may obſerve, that compaſſion for the diſtreſſed, and indignation at the wicked, are the beſt diſpoſitions which men can entertain; and that every ſtory which leaves ſuch impreſſions muſt be very edifying and inſtructive to good men. The remaining part of this hiſtory is very beautiful, and we cannot help conſidering it. *Joſeph* was preſerved, and, by the Divine favour, came to a ſtation of honour and great power. Famine obliged his brothers to ſeek relief in that country where he was become a ruler. When they appeared before him, he diſguiſed the firſt emotion of his ſoul, under an aſpect of ſeverity. He queſtioned them about his father's condition; and, when mention was made of his younger brother, who had no ſhare in the cruel offence committed againſt him, he diſcovered an earneſt deſire to ſee him. When, at laſt, he declared himſelf to be their brother *Joſeph*, they were ſtruck with remorſe and terror: But he repaid their former cruelties with a generous forgiveneſs; he relieved their diſtreſs; he ſaw again his aged father, and paid the duty of a grateful child. Whilſt we are attending to a ſtory of this kind, it nouriſhes every good diſpoſition of the heart,

and we are the better prepared by it to act a noble, generous and compaſſionate part towards our fellow-creatures. If we can imitate ſuch circumſtances in the ſtory of a Tragedy, we may preſume that the effect will be ſimilar; and it muſt appear ſtrange, to find any Tragedy cenſured, before we pretend to ſhow that it fails in this point. The ſubject we are now upon has been brought in queſtion, on occaſion of the Tragedy of DOUGLAS; and no perſon ſure can judge of that performance, who is not acquainted with the conduct of the ſtory on which it is built. But, if any perſon has proceeded ſo far, from a general diſapprobation of the Stage, I am perſuaded, that a few reflexions upon the repreſentations of this performance, would be ſufficient to reconcile him to it. It was well received by every audience, and ſeemed to make a deep impreſſion. The ſentiments it excites are thoſe of admiration of virtue, compaſſion to the diſtreſſed, and indignation againſt the wicked cauſe of their ſufferings. In every ſtory of diſtreſs, which is not merely accidental, wicked characters muſt appear, as well as good ones; for we cannot impute injury and cruelty to any other but the wicked: Their appearance however improves the mind, by foſtering our averſion to wickedneſs, in the ſame degree as the view of amiable characters heightens our love of virtue, by engaging our hearts in its behalf. Hence

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the generoſity of *Joſeph*, and the wickedneſs of his brothers, are equal matter of improvement and edification to our minds.

When the Tragedy of *Douglas* becomes yet more public, it will appear to have a tendency ſimilar to this. The deſigns of one perſon are painted in ſuch colours of hateful depravity, as to become a neceſſary object of deteſtation. The miſtakes of another awaken our caution, and become a leſſon of prudence. The generous and elevated mind of a third, warm and exalt our ſentiments; and that perſon, on whom the chief diſtreſs of this ſtory falls, moves to compaſſion, and proves at laſt a warning againſt raſh and fatal deſpair. Agreeable to this ſhort repreſentation, the performance has found a favourable reception with the public, and given proof how far grave and ſerious compoſitions may engage the minds of men, and convey inſtruction under the ſhew of amuſement. It has likewiſe had the ordinary teſtimony of diſtinguiſhed merit; it has ſtruck out ſome ſparks of envy and ſpite. This kind of fire, we may believe, is ſeldom extinct, but it only flames upon extraordinary occaſions, when any remarkable merit, or a riſing fame is to be conſumed. People who carried it in their breaſt, have paid their duty regularly to every good Writer in every age; in ſo much that their attendance is now required to compleat his honours: Their ſilence therefore would have been

been the ſevereſt blow they could have ſtruck at the Author of *Douglas*. I think very differently indeed of thoſe who are ſincerely anxious for the intereſt of religion, and who cenſure every Writer of a Play, becauſe they apprehend ſomewhat immoral and offenſive in the very nature of the Stage. I reſpect the intentions of ſuch, however I may think them miſtaken in this particular, and flatter myſelf, that, whilſt we agree in condemning any particular abuſes which may have place on the Stage, we ſhall likewiſe be of one mind in applauding whatever will contribute to render the amuſements of that place inoffenſive and inſtructive. This is the only point I have laboured in this Paper, and only plead againſt an opinion which would place all Theatrical performances upon the ſame level. With the people who are likely to oppoſe me, the very name of a Play implies ſomewhat criminal and immoral. A near view of the ſubject ſhould be ſufficient to correct this apprehenſion; but, whilſt any reſpectable authority continues in favour of it, we can ſcarcely expect to remove it entirely. The authority of the Chriſtian Church is ſuppoſed by ſome to be clearly on that ſide of the queſtion: But will any body ſay, that the Chriſtian Church has invariably diſcouraged good Plays. In the times of our Saviour and his Apoſtles, the pureſt times of the Chriſtian Church, no ſuch marks of diſapprobation appear. The Fathers

Fathers of the Church, whoſe authority is probably referred to on this occaſion, ought ſurely to have very little credit with us on their own account: A great part of the ſuperſtition of the Church of *Rome* is derived from their inventions; and we have already totally rejected the authority of them and their Oral Traditions, when we reformed the corruptions of the Popiſh Church. We may however, in charity, allow, that they might have had ſome reaſon for their oppoſition to Stage-Plays. Chriſtianity, in their times, was ſtruggling for a full eſtabliſhment; and they thought that Stage-Plays, being of Heathen compoſition, and having frequent reference to Pagan Divinity, might recal the minds of men to their former ſuperſtition. We have reaſon to believe, that, if Plays of a Chriſtian ſtrain had appeared, they would have met with no oppoſition from the friends of Chriſtianity: For *Gregory Nazianzen*, a Father of the Church, and a perſon of great piety, endeavoured to ſupplant Heathen Plays, by introducing one which he wrote himſelf, on the moſt intereſting ſubject of our religion. And we muſt ſo far confeſs that he acted a wiſe part: For, when corrupt performances are admitted on the Stage, the beſt thing we can do is to reject them, and ſupply their place with compoſitions more favourable to the important concerns of religion and morality. If the Plays on our Stage have not hitherto

hitherto been altogether pure, we have certainly been unlucky in the long ſilence we have kept on that ſubject; and doubly unlucky in breaking out with our cenſure, at a time when one very ſucceſsful attempt was made to ſupply the Stage with a Play, which might contribute to its reformation. The Popiſh Clergy, we know, exclaimed againſt the Stage, when it took part with the Reformers, and helped to overturn their own power: For it is well known, that Plays were acted at the Reformation, which very much helped on that work, by expoſing the vices and abſurdities of the Popiſh Clergy: It is no wonder therefore that they were enemies to the Stage; but we cannot ſurely have any reſentment to the Stage in our days, becauſe it formerly offended the Popiſh Clergy in promoting the Reformation.

When we come to conſider the law and doctrine of our Church with reſpect to Stage-Plays, it will appear that the cenſure which performances of this nature now meet with, doth not ariſe from any law, ſtatute or eſtabliſhed doctrine in this Church. We may even venture to affirm, that the prejudice to Plays in general is of late origin. The only act of this Church relating to Stage-Plays, which I have ever heard quoted, is an act of the Aſſembly which met in the year 1574. An act in the following terms. * "That no "Comedies

* Vid. Petrie's Church Hiſtory.

" Comedies or Tragedies or ſuch Plays ſhould " be made on any ſubject of canonical Scrip- " tures, nor on the *Sabbath Day*. If any Mi- " niſter be the Writer of ſuch a Play, he " ſhall be deprived of his Miniſtry: As for " Plays of another ſubject, they alſo ſhould " be examined before they be propounded " publickly." This act of Aſſembly, we ſee, ſuppoſes that Plays are allowable, and that Miniſters may write Plays on the ſubject of any hiſtory, which is not taken from canonical Scripture. So far the practice is agreeable to the laws of this eſtabliſhed Church, and it is not pretended that there is any other eccleſiaſtical law now in being with reſpect to Stage-Plays. We hear indeed of certain Proceedings of the Preſbytery of *Edinburgh* about thirty years ago, when they publiſhed an admonition to diſcourage the Stage. We would willingly believe, for the honour of the dead, that they took this ſtep in oppoſition to ſome faulty and immoral Plays which were then acted, and that they would have been loth to diſcourage performances of a better tendency, which might promiſe a reformation of ſuch abuſes. Their example, at any rate, is no law; and to follow them without examination would imply a conceſſion of infallibility, which they never laid claim to. It is needleſs to mention the names of Clergymen of unqueſtioned reputation in the Chriſtian Church, who have written Plays for the Stage; or to

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mention how frequent it is to conſider a right taſte and judgment in ſuch performances, as an accompliſhment neceſſary to every man of letters, whether Clergyman or layman. Such authorities can be but of little avail after we have had the ſubject itſelf before us, and an opportunity of judging for ourſelves. I ſhall therefore go on to take another view of the Stage, and conſider ſome inconveniencies which are ſuppoſed to attend it. Few things of human concern are free from inconveniencies; we need not therefore be ſurprized, that ſome are apprehended to belong to the Stage. We may ſuſpect that Theatrical Entertainments engage the minds at leaſt of our youth too much, and carry them away from other ſubjects of attention, which make a part either of their buſineſs or their education. This ſuſpicion is equally well grounded with reſpect to every other amuſement: For people who are diſpoſed to be idle, will eaſily find avocations from buſineſs; and the Stage has one peculiar advantage, its being the amuſement only of a ſtated time, and not always at hand to tempt people who are idly diſpoſed. This objection goes upon a ſuppoſition that perſons of all tempers run with equal eagerneſs to the amuſements of the Stage; they differ however greatly from one another in this particular, and they who are the moſt captivated with them, acquire a degree of coolneſs and indifference from time and familiarity. We may

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venture to aſk whether knowledge, whether induſtry and commerce have declined in this City ſince the Play-houſe was firſt opened here. It will be owned that they have rather increaſed. We may appeal to perſons who have the care of the education of youth in other places, whether they would not gladly ſee their pupils come to the Theatre, and mix with grave and decent company, if by that means they could break up more dangerous meetings for low gaming and riot, where youth have no good example to lead them, and no reſtraint from a ſenſe of decency or ſhame. The Stage, I think, may well bear a compariſon with other amuſements which youth will deviſe for themſelves, if they are debarred from this. When we conſider the ſtrain of thoſe Plays which have met with the moſt favourable reception from the public, obſervations will occur to the honour of human nature; for they are Plays which excel in moving compaſſion, which intereſt an audience in behalf of amiable characters, which give the proper applauſe to virtue, and treat vice with ignominy and reproach. A tragedy, which fails in exciting theſe emotions, or which would ſhock our favourable apprehenſions of virtue, would ſoon be rejected with diſguſt. We may conſult on this point an author, whom we hold in ſuch eſteem, that we make our children read his works, almoſt as early as their catechiſm. He has obſerved, that

a Play, tho' defective in ornament, and without any affectation to pleaſe by pompous and ſounding expreſſion; if it is furniſhed with a juſt moral and true repreſentation of nature, will carry the preference with every audience from more ſplendid and ſhowy performances. When we ſee an audience therefore in tears for an object of compaſſion, when we find them affected with the generous ſentiments which come from a virtuous character, deeply engaged in wiſhes for the ſucceſs of the good, and for the diſappointment of the wicked; it would ſcarcely occur that ſuch an audience could be better employed in an hour of leiſure. Whatever our peculiar occupations are, virtue is the buſineſs of all, and we ſhould not be excluded from any place where it may be learned. We know how few amuſements there are for which this plea can be offered: It is well, we think, if they are innocent relaxations from buſineſs, we ſeldom expect to find them ſchools of morality. But were this plea laid aſide, we ought to make ſure that other amuſements, leſs favourable to the habits of buſineſs, may not come in the way of our youth; and that our pretended ſeverity may not prove the occaſion of greater licentiouſneſs. It will be ſaid that our youth may go too often to the Play-houſe. They may go too often to any amuſement; but we are aſſured here that they can go no oftener than plays are acted, which is by no means ſo frequent

quent, as other avocations from buſineſs may occur to them. As there is a danger that youth may exceed in every amuſement they are given to, thoſe amuſements ſhould be moſt diſcouraged, in which the exceſs is moſt dangerous. I will venture to ſay that no place of public reſort, under the influence of decency, and in the preſence of reſpectable perſons, can be ſo dangerous, as cabals which are formed in ſecret, and apart from ſuch influence. If any abuſes yet remain on our Stage, we ſhould not delay to reform them. But I have mentioned theſe abuſes ſo often, that ſome of my readers will begin to have a very terrible notion of them: However, I will venture to inform them, that no abuſe was ever admitted on any Stage, but might paſs for perfect decency, when compared to what they may have often heard at a goſſiping, a merry-making, or a meeting of young fellows. The Play-houſe is frequented by people of both ſexes, whoſe rank, whoſe age and manners, are ſufficient to command reſpect, and to bring decency along with them into any place. It is an uncommon compliment we pay them, in ſuppoſing that our youth are corrupted in their company; I ſhould rather think, that, conſidering the nature of the entertainment, and the reſpect due to the company, we ſhould ſee, with ſatisfaction, ſuch ſpectacles become a part in the amuſements of our youth, and hope that their idle hours would find there,

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not only agreeable relaxation, but improvement too.

It has, I underſtand, given offence of late, that perſons of grave and reſpectable character, were preſent at the repreſentation of a new tragedy, which they thought a good one. Great part of this offence ſhould be removed, when we recollect that this, and many ſuch performances, have a tendency very favourable to ſobriety and morality; for they muſt be very dignified characters indeed who muſt keep at a diſtance, when the advancement of virtue is in any degree concerned. Their part of the cenſure, however, is put in a new light. It is ſaid, that altho' a practice may be innocent in itſelf, yet perſons of grave character ought to avoid it, becauſe it gives offence to other people; and being thought immoral, their neighbour may by ſuch an example, be ſhaken and unſettled in what he thinks his own duty. We are inſtructed to this purpoſe in the eighth chapter of *Paul*'s epiſtle to the *Corinthians*, where he conſiders the practice of eating meat, which had been offered to idols. The reader will be pleaſed to obſerve, that this inſtruction relates to actions, in their own nature indifferent, and cannot be applied to any other. The Apoſtle explains it in the eighth verſe in theſe words: "Meat commendeth us not to God: for neither if we eat are we the better, neither if we eat not are we the worſe." He ends

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the chapter with this concluſion ; " Where-
" fore, if meat make my brother offend,
" I will eat no fleſh while the world ſtand-
" eth, leſt I make my brother offend." If the eating of ſuch meat had been criminal in itſelf, he would have avoided, and forbid the practice on that account. If on the contrary it had been right, and a commendable practice, he would have embraced it, and ſtudied to correct the prejudice which any perſon might have entertained againſt it. For his whole life was a continued courſe of oppoſition to both *Jews* and *Gentiles*, where their prejudices ſtood in need of correction. Let us therefore apply the Apoſtle's inſtruction and example to the preſent queſtion. Is it perfectly indifferent to a man whether he goes to a play or no ? I ſhall ſuppoſe that it is. Is it likewiſe indifferent to the public what ſort of people compoſe the ordinary audience at our Theatre ? I believe it is not. The Manager of every theatre muſt ſuit his entertainments to the company, and if he is not ſupported by the grave and the ſober, he muſt ſuit himſelf to the licentious and profane. We know that the language of the theatre, or any other language whatever, may be employed either to recommend virtue, or to inſinuate folly and licentiouſneſs. If licentious people alone frequent this entertainment, they will perhaps encourage what they like to hear. But perſons of ſobriety, and regard to virtue, would

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make that entertainment form itſelf to a very different ſtrain, and give the whole a very different influence on the manners of mankind. They would reject and condemn what was exceptionable, they would promote and encourage what was agreeable to ſound reaſon, and favourable to virtue. Happily for us, this is no new thing; for the Play-houſe has been long the reſort of perſons of both ſexes, who are the moſt ſcrupulous on the point of reputation and decency; and their preſence has, no doubt, contributed to reform ſome abuſes, which may have, at ſome times, crept into the ſtage. Their preſence therefore has done a great ſervice to mankind; and if any perſon is prejudiced enough to think otherwiſe, 'tis high time he was undeceived. The Apoſtle inſtructs us to refrain from an indifferent action, if it offend our brother; but he has often commanded, and has ſhown the example, to do good in the face of prejudice, and every ſuch prejudice in time will be corrected. We know that in every nation there muſt be amuſements and public entertainments, and the Stage has always made one in every civilized and poliſhed nation. We cannot hope to aboliſh it; and if we could, we ſhould only make way for the return of drunkenneſs, gaming, and rude cabals, which the more decent converſation and manners of civilized times, have in a great meaſure aboliſhed. We ſhould not even propoſe

poſe to aboliſh an entertainment, which is founded on the beſt principles of human nature, the love of virtue, and compaſſion to the diſtreſſed: For who would ever go to a tragedy, if he had not a heart formed to pity, and a mind ſuſceptible of the admiration due to worthy characters. It is the duty of grave and reſpectable men to watch over an entertainment of this kind, that it may not deviate from the good purpoſes which it is calculated to ſerve. What they do to this purpoſe, either in oppoſing the bad or promoting the good, is matter of duty, and their conduct in it is not to be regulated by the opinion of any perſon who is pleaſed to take offence.

The ſtate of the poor has been mentioned, as a conſideration which muſt render this entertainment at preſent pernicious and criminal. We cannot be too attentive to every circumſtance which can affect the ſtate of the poor, in the difficulties which they are now threatened with; and we have reaſon to believe, that the Gentlemen of this country are well diſpoſed to take any meaſures which may be thought proper for their relief. How the Theatre comes to be thought any hindrance to ſuch meaſures, we cannot eaſily apprehend. The poor may be divided into two claſſes; thoſe who are indigent, but ſtill in a condition to earn their bread by ſome ſort of labour or induſtry; and thoſe, on the other hand, who

who, by reaſon of age or ſickneſs, are unable to earn any ſubſiſtence. It is remarkable, that of late years more care has been taken than formerly to provide for the poor, who are unfit for any kind of labour. Poor-houſes have been built in many pariſhes, under the management of the Gentlemen and people of ſubſtance, who have taxed themſelves for that purpoſe. It were cruel therefore to load the body of our Gentlemen with an imputation of neglect in this article, at a time when their conduct deſerves commendation. And it were imprudent by ſuch an imputation to encourage any perſon able to work in the expectation that he may be idle, and yet receive gratuitous charities. If any perſon were rich enough for the undertaking, he could not poſſibly do a more ſignal miſchief to his country, than that of maintaining the whole poor of *Great Britain* in idleneſs. It has pleaſed Providence, for wiſe purpoſes, to place men in different ſtations, and to beſtow upon them different degrees of wealth. Without this circumſtance there could be no ſubordination, no government, no order, no induſtry. Every perſon does good, and promotes the happineſs of ſociety, by living agreeable to the rank in which Providence has placed him. Whilſt his gratuitous charities relieve the poor who are unable to work, his other expence becomes a fund for the ſubſiſtence of the induſtrious; nor is it proper that they ſhould expect ſubſiſtence

ſiſtence upon any other terms than thoſe of induſtry and ſobriety. The money which the rich expends is paid for the labour of the poor. Different trades live upon the profits of furniſhing his cloathing, his table, and his equipage. It is evident how many poor induſtrious people would ſtarve, if he did not buy the works which they furniſh him. The very money he lays out for amuſement comes at laſt into the hands of the poor, and is paid as the price of their labour. A part of it we ſhall ſuppoſe is laid out for the amuſements of the Theatre, and the people who receive it there, are ſo many hands who diſtribute that money among the induſtrious poor. Every Player muſt be cloathed, maintained and lodged: The money which he receives therefor is paid at laſt to the ſpinſtreſs, the weaver, the clothier, and other tradeſmen who live by furniſhing the ordinary neceſſaries of life. Whilſt from humanity we indulge the poor in their ſtation, we ought from juſtice to indulge the wealthy in theirs, and to expect that they are to go on agreeable to the habits of living which belong to their ſtation, and which in effect are neceſſary to the order and good of ſociety, and to the maintenance of the poor. If we ſhut up our places of entertainment, and deprive people of diſtinction of that ſociety and thoſe amuſements which they have a reliſh for, they muſt tire of living among us; and the few who yet remain will chuſe

to remove to another place, where they will not meet with popular antipathy, on account of their moſt commendable amuſements. Then indeed the money they expend would be loſt to the poor of their native country. This and every other city would feel, in ſuch a caſe, that the reſidence of perſons of fortune is neceſſary to give any number of tradeſmen, and induſtrious poor, the means of ſubſiſtence. How hard muſt it appear then, to give any encouragement to the poor to murmur againſt a circumſtance from which their induſtry may derive ſuch advantage? We may aſk, who are the moſt forward in this country to form charitable deſigns for the relief of the poor? The Gentlemen of this neighbourhood, I think, have ſet the example; and they too who were the readieſt to ſhed tears, for the diſtreſſes repreſented in the Tragedy of *Douglas*, have been the moſt forward in compaſſion to the poor, and in liberal deſigns for their relief.

After all I muſt confeſs that one conſideration remains, which muſt renew my diffidence on this point. A body of men reſpectable for their learning and gravity, who conſtitute a judicature in this city, have, without any exception, declared their diſapprobation of the Theatre in general; and, to ſhow that no exception could be admitted, have taken the alarm, juſt when the Tragedy, which I have had occaſion to mention, was introduced. I cannot

cannot pretend to ſpeak of their reaſons for ſo doing, until they are pleaſed to publiſh them; but muſt entertain great expectations of their force, ſince they are ſufficient to overpower what has appeared on the oppoſite ſide. Men of gravity are above trifling with the miſtakes and miſapprehenſions of a people, and certainly cannot long ly under any ſuch imputation. Men of learning need not be told, that part of every liberal education conſiſts, in learning to diſtinguiſh between Theatrical performances which are faulty, and thoſe which have a moral dignity and a good tendency; they know that a good Tragedy has been in all ages eſteemed amongſt the chief productions of human ability; that the authors of ſuch works become more renowned with poſterity than the princes and monarchs of the earth. The names of *Buchanan* and *Milton* are more reſpected than thoſe of *Henry* and *James*; and the names of *Cyrus* and *Xerxes* are leſs celebrated than thoſe of *Sophocles* and *Euripides*. I am, from theſe conſiderations, the more inclined to believe, that reaſons have occured againſt the Stage, which will appear very urgent when they are produced; and cannot imagine, that objections which ly againſt bad Plays only are now all the objections they have to plead againſt a good one, which may be conſidered as an attempt to make the Stage truly uſeful and inſtructive.

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This reſpectable body of men have paſſed a ſevere ſentence againſt one of their number, for being preſent at this repreſentation we are ſpeaking of. This likewiſe ſeems to proceed from ſome powerful motive not ſufficiently known: For they were not led to this act of ſeverity, in execution of any law or ſtatute of this Church. It muſt have been one of thoſe extraordinary caſes where a diſcretionary power is neceſſary. Such a power indeed is not aſſumed by any court of judicature in Europe, except one, which I will not name on this occaſion. It is happy for us, that the law of our Church has expreſsly forbid the exerciſe of any ſuch arbitrary and dangerous power. See *Form of Proceſs*, cap. 1. and 84. where it is expreſsly enacted, "That nothing "be admitted by any Church-judicature as the "ground of a proceſs for cenſure but what "has been declared cenſurable by the Word "of God, or by ſome act or univerſal cuſtom "of this National Church."——They were perhaps led to a proceeding, in appearance ſo little agreeable to the fundamental laws of their own ſociety, by a zeal to ſupport the laws of the State. People indeed are often more fond of work which they deviſe for themſelves, than they are of any buſineſs aſſigned them by others. It does not however appear, that they have done much honour to the legiſlature by their interpoſition on this occaſion. They have caſt an imputation of impiety

piety upon an amuſement which the law formally authoriſes in the Metropolis, which Our GRACIOUS SOVEREIGN honours with his preſence, and which the moſt reſpectable perſons in the legiſlature of *Great Britain* ſupport by their countenance.

FINIS.